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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 BUCHAREST 000914

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: SPECIAL ENVOY FOR HOLOCAUST ISSUES AMBASSADOR EDWARD O'DONNELL MARCH 20-23 VISIT TO ROMANIA

1. (U) Summary: Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Ambassador Edward O'Donnell March 20-23 met with senior GOR figures and members of the Romanian Jewish community to discuss property restitution and other concerns related to Romanian efforts to redress its Holocaust past. The Romanian delegation to the International Taskforce on Holocaust Education and the Ministry of Education underscored a commitment to improving Holocaust education curricula in Romanian schools. Slightly off-key were opinions offered at the MFA and Presidency that pointed to a more protracted and less decisive approach to the rescinding of an award given to a notorious Romanian anti-Semite and extremist. End Summary.

2. (U) Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Ambassador Edward O'Donnell traveled to Bucharest March 20-23 for a series of meetings with key figures involved in Romanian efforts to recognize, commemorate, and redress the country's involvement in the Holocaust. In most cases, officials and private citizens were receptive to U.S. interest in these core human rights issues and optimistic that Romania was finally come to terms with this tragic period in history. Presidential Advisor: Basescu "Moved" by Holocaust Museum

3. (SBU) In his meetings with Senior Presidential Advisor Claudiu Saftoiu and other senior GOR figures, Ambassador O'Donnell underscored the importance for the success of the Romanian restitution process to strive for transparency, non-discrimination and relaxed standards of documentation. He also stressed the need for swift action by the GOR in resolving the awarding of a Star of Romania medal of honor, Romania's highest decoration, to known anti-Semite and extreme nationalist party leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor. Saftoiu stated that a Commission of Honor, already announced in the official monitor, will convene for the first time in coming weeks and will have the authority to revoke awards. (Note: Saftoiu subsequently told PolChief April 7 that the independent commission will actually review the status and conduct of all recipients of the Star of Romania, although Commission members will no doubt focus on Tudor and recent revelations that in the early 1990's he "procured" under-aged girls for sexual purposes for Eugen Barbu, the now deceased founder of his political party. End note.)

4. (U) Saftoiu remarked that Basescu was "moved" by his visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and had told his advisers that he had previously been, like many Romanians, "a victim of misinformation about the Holocaust." Saftoiu also underscored that Basescu strongly supports the GOR's intention to introduce new legislation regarding the Holocaust and punishment for hate crimes. He asked for advice on a possible "role model" among other former Soviet Bloc countries who have recently passed similar legislation. Separately, Saftoiu observed that Basescu is personally committed to restituting communal religious property to its rightful owners, whenever possible, or alternatively, finding a suitable compensation solution for owners.

MFA State Secretary: Anti-Semitism still a Problem

5. (U) Ministry of Foreign Affairs State Secretary Teodor Baconschi observed that latent anti-Semitism remains a problem in Romania, stemming from misconceptions about Romanian Jews, sometimes combined with a misdirected nationalism. He suggested that a dialogue between the Romanian Orthodox Christian and Jewish communities would be one way of helping to resolve remaining anti-Semitic attitudes. "We need to dismantle clichés about Jews and communist rule," he stressed, referring to the view that Jews were disproportionately involved in Romanian Communist regime. Baconschi expressed support for Culture Minister Mona Musca's proposed establishment of a museum of Romanian Jewish history and culture. Turning to restitution, Baconschi noted that "restitution issues are extremely complex" but that the GOR is committed to finding a transparent resolution of restitution cases. On the Star of Romania, Baconschi noted that it was important that the GOR move cautiously so as to avoid the impression that revoking the award to Tudor would be "viewed as an attack on the former government."

New Moves Toward Property Restitution

16. (U) Delegate Minister Bogdan Olteanu, chairman of the Prime Minister's inter-ministerial working group on restitution, and Prime Ministerial Counselor Vlad Moisesescu discussed at length the GOR's intention of comprehensively reforming the restitution process. (Note: The Prime Minister recently formed the inter-ministerial working group consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Culture and Religion, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Finance and other concerned GOR bureaus when he moved restitution into his personal mandate. End note.) Olteanu stated that the GOR would introduce an amendment to the current legislation that would revamp what he characterized as the inefficient and nontransparent current model. Olteanu criticized the former Government's Restitution Commission, which he insisted aimed to "halt restitution," rather than justly return properties or compensate their owners.

17. (U) Moisesescu and Olteanu energetically discussed possible legislative solutions, to include, "GOR bond issuances by way of compensation" and sanction (including removal from office) of local officials. The latter is aimed at mayors who refuse to obey current legislation and retribute properties which have met the restitution criteria or for which favorable decision by the Restitution Commission has been given. Olteanu emphasized that the GOR views overhauling the restitution legislation as critical and is considering presenting that legislation by way of a "no confidence" vote in Parliament. He underscored that the current government is "serious" about restitution, observing that his own National Liberal Party (PNL) headquarters would be returned to its rightful owners. Olteanu and Moisesescu acknowledged, however, that the GOR is "still working on financial issues," but concluded that the GOR is firmly committed to "fair financial compensation."

18. (U) State Secretary for Restitution Ingrid Zaarour stressed her first priority is to assist the inter-ministerial working group with reforming the existing restitution legislation through amendments created in consultation with the parties involved, including religious denominations, property owner associations and ethnic groups. They hope to introduce this legislation to the Parliament for approval by the end of May 2005. Another priority is to review all of the pending cases and contact the petitioners with regard to any missing documentation which is slowing the pace of restitution decisions. The Secretariat hopes to soon have a website where petitioners

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can inquire electronically as to the status of their pending case. After a number of dossiers have been completed the Restitution Commission will meet weekly to approve the backlog of cases. Additionally, the Secretariat is launching a new program of independent "inspectors" who will survey buildings and land to determine the situation of properties subject to claim as well as to assess the value of the properties which cannot be returned owing to special circumstances.

19. (U) Tova Ben Nun, Chairperson of local Jewish charity Caritatea Foundation, remarked the Foundation is pleased with recent promises made by the Prime Minister on the reformation of the restitution system, including the goal of restitution in kind whenever possible. However, they remain cautious, as none of the statements have been transformed into actions. She mentioned they do not have a preference among restitution in kind, monetary compensation for demolished buildings or awarding of a like property. The Foundation is particularly troubled by the great number of restitution cases being challenged in court. Caritatea has 55 active cases, most of which were introduced by local government agencies. Ben Nun presented a letter to Ambassador O'Donnell, as well a dossier of documents explaining the most egregious restitution problems. Ambassador O'Donnell subsequently raised the examples of restitution problems provided by Ben Nun with senior GOR representatives. Of particular concern is a situation where the Mayor of Iasi sold restituted land without the permission of the Foundation who was to receive the land back from the Restitution Commission. Ms. Ben Nun has contacted the State Secretariat for Restitution as well as Prime Ministerial Advisor, Vlad Moisesescu, for help in resolving the issue. While she has received verbal assurances of help from the GOR, no firm steps have been taken at this time.

10. (U) Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania Acting President Iulian Sorin also noted how pleased the Community was with the recent statements made by the Prime Minister regarding the property restitution process and his participation in the opening ceremonies of the New Holocaust Museum at Yad Vashem in Israel. He too is cautious as such promises have also been heard in the past. He remarked that

the Jewish Community claims are being processed and followed by the Caritas Foundation (Tova Ben Nun), as the Jewish Community has little financial support. Its resources are, in fact, entirely devoted to social welfare projects. President Sorin expressed that the restitution process must be sped up and local authorities punished for abusing the system through court challenges. On another note, the Jewish Community is concerned about lack of state funding to maintain and restore synagogues. President Sorin remarked, "The newest Synagogue is 80 years old and we do not have the resources to save these historical monuments." Jewish community leaders also expressed concern about signs of resurgent anti-Semitism, providing Ambassador O'Donnell copies of recent quasi-underground and overtly anti-Semitic Romanian journals.

Improvements in Holocaust Education

11. (U) State Secretary Jozsef Koto, Director of Curricula Development and Liliana Popescu from the Ministry of Education stated that they are very happy that Romania has been accepted onto the International Taskforce for Holocaust Education. They hope to use the membership to further develop both the Holocaust school curriculum, as well as increase the teacher training programs. Popescu noted that new text books are being developed for use in secondary schools with improved sections on Jewish history and the Holocaust in Romania. The textbooks will be reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religions and Culture in the near future. They hope to have them in use in schools by the beginning of the next academic year. The Ministry is particularly pleased with the development of optional Holocaust and Jewish History courses at the local and regional level. Several schools have developed regionally based optional courses for secondary students. Some of these courses are being approved at the National Level, with input from outside experts such as Yad Vashem, for use by all teachers. They hope to have a website soon where teachers will be able to download and share online curricula.

12. (U) Popescu also mentioned that several hundred teachers have participated in one of many teacher training programs both in Romania and abroad in the last two years. The Ministry of Education is currently working with "pre-teaching" courses at Universities to add a component on the Holocaust to all teacher preparation courses. Teaching centers in Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj and Craiova are offering Holocaust education short courses and seminars. Finally, the Ministry of Education wants to build upon the success of the first annual Holocaust Remembrance day held in October 2004. The activities sponsored by the Ministry and the individual schools sparked a great deal of interest with the students. The Ministry would like to further encourage the use of Holocaust speakers, movies, literature and other creative media in schools.

13. (U) Stelian Stoian, MFA Director General for UN Global Affairs chaired the first meeting of the new Romanian delegation to the International Taskforce for Holocaust Education. Romania became a full member of the Taskforce at the Triste in December. Ambassador O'Donnell addressed the group on their future role as Romania's representatives to the Taskforce. He stressed that education is in integral part of a three step process (education, legislation and law enforcement) in combating Holocaust deniers and anti-Semitism. Also in attendance were the Israeli Ambassador to Romania and representatives from the French and Polish Embassies.

14. (U) Comment: The meetings with the GOR and other representatives were, on the whole, positive. The intentions to reform the restitution process are good, well laid out with timelines for completion and appear to be moving forward. We now look to the GOR to match these plans with credible actions. Less impressive are current plans to lift the "Star of Romania" from leading anti-Semite and xenophobe Vadim Tudor. The process envisioned to strip him of this recently awarded honor has become more complex and less focused. Without outside encouragement, it may fail to live up to the expectations. The Embassy will continue to push for results in this endeavor - in a reasonably brief time.

15. (U) This cable has been cleared by Ambassador O'Donnell.

16. (U) Amembassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams are available on the Bucharest SIPRNET Website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/bucharest .

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